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CIA did not support death squads in Salvador, House report concludes

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WASHINGTON — A House intelligence committee investigation has concluded that the CIA did not "directly encourage or support" death-squad killings in El Salvador, but it criticizes the agency's lack of early information about the problem.

Responding to allegations that the CIA had ties to Salvadoran security forces implicated in the slayings, a committee staff report released last week said that U.S. intelligence officials have sought to halt death-squad killings.

"U.S. intelligence agencies have not conducted any of their activities in such a way as to directly encourage or support death-squad activities," the report said. "To the contrary, U.S. intelligence activities have been directed, sometimes successfully, at countering death-squad activity, reducing the power of individuals connected with death squads, and seeking their removal from positions of authority."

The report added, however, that "some U.S. intelligence relationships with individuals connected with death squads" may have given the

impression to Salvadorans that the CIA "condoned, because it was aware of, some death-squad activities."

The report said such contacts were "regrettable but perhaps unavoidable. If U.S. intelligence is to collect information about death-squads, it must do so by obtaining information from individuals associated with or knowledgeable of such activities."

But the report criticized U.S. intelligence agencies for paying little attention to death-squad killings until two years ago and then tightly restricting U.S. government circulation of the information it had collected.

"Death-squad activity could have been and should have been the focus of U.S. intelligence collection earlier than it was and a topic of U.S. intelligence analysis available to a more widespread group of policy-level consumers," the report said.

Asked about the report issued by the Democratic-controlled committee, former Democratic Rep. James Shannon of Massachusetts, who requested the death-squad investigation in March, questioned the panel's conclusion clearing the CIA.

The information was "certainly

not as conclusive as the committee makes it sound," Shannon said. He contended that committee investigators "haven't looked at it carefully enough."

Human-rights groups estimate that more than 50,000 civilians have been killed during five years of civil war in El Salvador. Many of the victims are believed to have been murdered by death squads that reportedly included members of the government's security forces.

The Reagan administration says that while such political slayings continue, the Salvadoran government has succeeded in sharply reducing their number, and has removed some officials implicated in the violence. The United States backs the Salvadoran government in its war against leftist guerrillas.

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson declined comment on the House report.

The House committee report, like an earlier one by the Senate intelligence committee, said death squads include members of Salvadoran security and military forces as well as private individuals.